

GUEST ESSAY

There's a Simple Way to Stop Dangerous Wildfires. We Barely Use It.

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By M.R. O'Connor

Ms. O'Connor is the author, most recently, of "Ignition: Lighting Fires in a Burning World." She wrote from Brooklyn.

The Northeast didn't see it coming, but suddenly we are putting out a lot of wildfires: The state of New York is in the midst of its most active wildfire season in more than a decade. A wildfire in southwestern Massachusetts grew to 1,000 acres this week, the second fire in the region to reach that size this month. New Jersey has suppressed 500 wildfires and counting this fall.

As droughts and heat intensify, the risk of wildfires like these becoming catastrophic is growing across the United States. And more Americans who face this risk are tired of merely hoping they survive these events. So in places everywhere from Texas to California to North Carolina, citizens are organizing themselves and wielding a powerful tool: setting fires under controlled conditions.

The United States Forest Service has been ramping up its use of this kind of fire, also known as prescribed burns; last year, the agency nearly doubled the area of National Forest lands it burned to two million acres. But after generations of suppressing fire, many millions of acres of brush and tree fuels have built up, increasing the risk of large, dangerous wildfires. And so private landowners and community associations from across the political spectrum are trying to make up

the difference: Between 1998 and 2018, these groups, as well as state and municipal agencies, were responsible for 93 percent of the increase in controlled fires in the country, not only reducing the threat of destructive wildfires, but also restoring prairie and forest landscapes that have adapted to fire over millennia.

Landowners who want to manage the land with fire can face myriad obstacles: confusing agency bureaucracies, lengthy permitting processes, prohibitive liability exposure and restrictive air quality regulations. Prescribed-burn associations — neighbors helping neighbors burn — are addressing some of these issues by pooling community members' resources, experience and time. Think of it as a barn raising with smoke and flame. But they are constrained in the good they can do. In an era of greater wildfire risk driven by fuel accumulation and global warming, governments should be swiftly removing barriers to the use of prescribed fires on private land.

One morning last March in central Nebraska, I experienced the thrill of a community burn firsthand when I joined a group of 18 volunteers age 10 to 70 years old, stamping their boots in the cold and cracking jokes. Parked behind us was a motley assortment of fire engines, trucks and an old five-ton military supply truck with a thousand-gallon water tank.

That day, the members of the Custer Prescribed Burn Association set ablaze 973 acres of prairie. My job was to carry a metal canister filled with fuel and set fire to patches of bluestem grass. It was, as one volunteer put it to me, “just authentic fun.”

As word of the value of prescribed fires gets around, more communities around the country want to join in. There are now 133 groups in 22 states, twice the number there were five years ago, and they're lighting hundreds of prescribed fires on tens of thousands of acres each year.

Burn associations' role is improving the health and resilience of landscapes before disasters strike. California's largest fire this year, the Park fire, spread over 400,000 acres and destroyed or damaged around 750 homes and other structures. It started just outside Chico, where a prescribed-burn association formed after the Camp fire

killed 85 people in 2018 in the nearby town of Paradise. Since its start, the association, named for Butte County, has trained dozens of citizens, written burn plans and organized a crew of volunteers ready to set fires to eliminate fuels around homes in the community.

And it's working. In the town of Cohasset, the prescribed burn association burned areas around several homes that later survived the Park fire. On a map it looked like an oasis.

David Mitchell, the coordinator of that group, evacuated his own home during the Park fire. He was happy that the association's work prevented some people's homes from burning, but he was also distraught that it didn't have the resources to help everyone who requested it. "What's hard is someone's name is written down on the roster, someone who wanted fire, and now their house is leveled," Mr. Mitchell told me.

The interest in using prescribed fires to mitigate wildfires exceeds capacity in Butte County so much that Mr. Mitchell would need a couple of full-time fire crews just to keep up with demand. As he sees it, the only solution is to get as many community members burning as possible — but permitting restrictions on prescribed fires in towns such as Paradise mean the group is limited in what it can accomplish.

To the southeast of Chico, an association in Placer County is doing micro-burning — burning around 10 acres or less — to prevent the next megafire from swallowing its communities. A group in the Texas Panhandle is doing the opposite: conducting prescribed burns on up to 20,000 acres of ranch land each summer with just a handful of dues-paying members.

But to address the scale of environmental challenges we face, the revolution in communities organizing around good fires needs to grow even bigger. To support that, government agencies from the federal level down should review statutes that impede citizens' use of prescribed fire as a tool.

The Environmental Protection Agency's new rule on National Ambient Air Quality Standards, which lowered the annual limit of fine-particle pollution to nine micrograms per cubic meter from 12 micrograms, should make clear accommodations for prescribed fires. (The smoke generated from a controlled burn pales in comparison with a megafire's.) California's creation of a liability claim fund, which covers losses in the rare instance that a prescribed fire goes out of control, should be copied by other states. As in Florida and Georgia, liability standards for private landowners should be lowered to gross negligence, a standard that has been shown to result in landowners burning more acres. While working with fire has inherent dangers, one study showed that the risk of liability for out-of-control prescribed fires was below 1 percent.

Prescribed-burn associations could also benefit from more funding from government agencies, municipal budgets, nonprofits or even private donors. But the flexibility of these associations should not be hampered. The model is successful because it is so adaptable and can fit any community.

Witnessing the way that prescribed-burn association members across generations, cultural backgrounds and political beliefs are working together to care for the land has changed my view of the future. This growing social movement contradicts the narrative of a country so distracted by our divisions that we cannot solve the ecological challenges bearing down on us. These associations are evidence that solutions are sometimes very simple: We can solve problems by showing up for our neighbors and doing the work together.

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